DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 366 896 CG 025 250

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TITLE Pre-Adolescent Children's Reaction to Divorce.
PUB DATE [93]
NOTE 20p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Child Custody; Childhood Needs; *Children; *Coping; *Divorce; *Emotional Adjustment; Emotional Development; Family Structure; Life Events; Parent Child Relationship; *Sibling Relationship; *Social Support Groups

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on pre-adolescent children and how they cope with parental divorce. It considers the case of split custody, more common among older children than younger ones, in which one parent has custody of one or more of the children and the other parent has custody of one or more of the siblings. It focuses on the sibling relationship and the role of siblings in helping a child cope with his/her parents' divorce. The importance of the child's having access to all family members during and after the divorce process is emphasized. Other sections of the paper focus on anticipating the child's needs, the child's reaction to environmental changes that accompany divorce, and changes in how the child sees his/her parents and him/herself. The tendency for children to blame themselves for their parents' divorce is explored. Physical problems, caused by psychological stresses, that children may experience during a divorce are discussed and the child's feeling of being torn between the parents is addressed. It is noted that the child's schoolwork may suffer and that the child may feel insecure about the future. Regression, denial, and repression are discussed as possible defense mechanisms that the child may employ to cope with the stresses of divorce. Finally, ways to help children cope with divorce and the counseling needs of some children are discussed. (NB)

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ED 366 896

Pre-Adolescent Children's Reaction to Divorce

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Running Head: Children

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the children of divorce, and how they cope and deal with this disruptive event in their lives. Covered are several feelings the child may experience during the divorce process, and ways adults can prepare the child for this event in hopes to lessen the harmful effects divorce may have on their children.

Children as used in this paper refer to pre-adolescents, or children between approximately 3 to 11 years of age.

Introduction

Divorce rates have dramatically increased over the last several years, and a decrease does not seem imminent.

The attention is normally focused on the principles. They receive the counseling, the warm hugs from friends and relatives, and the community's support. But what happens to the children? They become victims. The children's emotional needs are often overlooked, or dismissed. If the children's emotional needs are not considered, the consequences could be devastating in terms of their emotional development.

Split Custody

Split custody is when one of the divorced parents have legal and physical custody of one or more of the children while the other parent also has legal and physical custody of one or more of the siblings. Research indicates that the most destructive aspect of divorce on a child is when children are split from each other. This phenomenon is extremely rare in very young siblings, but it happens increasingly more often when the siblings are older. According to Nichols (1986), the conditions that enable siblings to bond and develop a partnership are a high degree of physical and emotional access, the need for meaningful personal identity, and the shortage of parental influence.

The most obvious and crucial of these three conditions is the lack of physical and emotional access. When children are separated, they not only lose their best friend, but also their support system. Siblings spend much more time with each other than they do with either parent, and when a devastating event such as divorce occurs, the children depend on each other for mutual support and comfort. The feelings of "at least we have each other" is a normal manifestation between the siblings.

Parents are not very comforting towards the children mainly because they themselves are going through a difficult situation, and require support themselves. The children's natural tendency is to gravitate more towards the

other siblings for strength and reassurance. Often times the older sibling can soften the blow of divorce on the younger and help them accept the losses inherent in divorce, as well as to make a more realistic assessment of what is occurring than the younger child can make alone (Everett, 1991).

Access to Family Members

It is as important for the child to have continuing access to all members of the family, as it is for the child to have a stable physical environment. Continuing access provides for the psychological support along with the commonality of experience that the family alone can identify. It has been argued that the bond between siblings has more impact, and is of greater importance to kids than their relationship with the parents. Siblings assume many roles with one another such as protector, antagonist, competitor, nurture-giver, and/or nurture-receiver (Everett, 1991).

Separating children from each other can be realistically compared to the concept of "object loss." "This loss precipitates a grief and mourning process, including withdrawal of emotional investment from the lost object, and reinvestment in new object relationships" (Everett, 1991, p. 256). It is imperative to keep the siblings together whenever possible. Separating them will serve only to confuse, alienate, and ultimately destroy a nurturant, life long partnership.

Anticipating Children's Needs

The needs of the children of parents contemplating divorce must be of paramount concern. The children are confused and uncertain of their future. The children may feel betrayed by the parents, and see their parents destroying the only relationship they have ever known. With the destruction of the parents relationship, the children's world and their sense of security may also be destroyed.

The children should be kept abreast of the problems in the family to the extent that they will be affected. This is not to suggest that the child should be made aware of the specific problems the parents are experiencing, but the child should be informed to the extent of their understanding, and to the general direction in which the parents are moving prior to the divorce. As with the parents, the children must emotionally prepare themselves with the prospect of losing a significant person (mother or father) in their lives.

To Whom Does The Child Turn?

When the parents divorce, the child undoubtedly will experience a profound sense of loss. The child will grieve for the loss of the relationship, and will require emotional support. But to whom does the child turn? "The hurt, untrusting child is in the uncomfortable position of needing help from parents who have just betrayed his/her trust," (Cull & Hardy, 1974, p. 92)

and may no longer be in the vicinity to give the necessary support to the child, even if the child would be willing to accept support. So often times the children must deal with these emotions on their own, with other siblings, or with outside contacts.

Change in Environment

Another obstacle for the child to deal with that compounds his/her frustration is the sudden change in environment. With divorce often comes a change in living arrangements. There is normally less financial support which means that the family may have to move from the only home the child has ever known, to a less expensive, more affordable community. Uprooting children from the safety of their secure surroundings and life long friends will undoubtedly have a negative effect on their development. Friends provide a support system for children that is not easily replaced. Relocating to an unfamiliar, unfriendly, new neighborhood will contribute to the child's insecurity. Movements such as this may make the children become anxious and question the parent's ability to maintain a structured, stable environment, thus complicating or stagnating the healing process.

How the Children See Their Parents

Along with the divorce comes a change in the way children perceives their parents. Prior to the divorce the child was able to appreciate and integrate

the different idiosyncrasies of their parents. After or during the divorce they are likely to idealize one parent while depreciating the other (Cull & Hardy, 1974). The children may begin to purge themselves of traits of the estranged parent, seeing these traits as detrimental to their personality. This can be harmful, especially if the purged traits are redeeming qualities that would help the children better deal with their situation and life as a whole. Qualities that were once adored become useless and obsolete. The child's value system and role models become blurred if not lost. Such detachment weakens the child's ego, resulting in loss of self-esteem and self-awareness, and produces a poor base on which to grow (Abrons & Rogers, 1987).

How Children See Themselves

Children have a tendency to blame themselves for the failure of their parents marriage. They experience an unrealistic sense of guilt and responsibility (Cull & Hardy, 1974). They are living in an egocentric world and believe that everything revolves around them, and therefore may believe that all arguments are because of them. They mistakenly belive that the divorce is because of something that they have done wrong. They may believe that since their parents no longer love each other, then they must no longer love them. They may feel unlovable.

Physical Problems

Many children suffer from physical problems during and immediately after divorce. These problems can largely be attributed to psychological stress. Children have been known to experience a variety of physical ailments that vary in severity. Many children complained of different degrees of headaches and stomachaches. Children suffering from medical problems prior to the divorce often reported intensified symptoms during and after the divorce proceedings. This increase is strongly correlated to the severity of the conflict between the parents. (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

Torn Between Parents

The children may feel torn between the parents. Parents denigrating each other in the presence of the children adds to the confusion of the children. The children's sense of loyalty to each parent is often called into question, and the children don't know which way to turn. The children may have to deal with the accusations leveled by the parents towards each other as well as the parents using the child as a bargaining chip or a tool to facilitate their own agenda.

Unfortunately, the children often find themselves as a mediator. Many children will see it as their personal responsibility to see that the relationship, if not the marriage is reconciled. This is a tremendous undertaking for one so

young. Children are sometimes forced to take sides, selecting one parent over the other. Since it is seldom the child's decision on whom side he/she should take, this may have the effect of confirming to the child that it was indeed his/her fault for the separation in the first place.

School Work

Children seldom continue to do well in school during and immediately following a divorce. Many parents and teachers alike expect the child to continue to function well in school despite the turmoil at home (Kaslow & Schwartz, 1987). The teachers and often the parents fail to realize that it's not only the parents that are going through difficult time.. but the child is trying desperately to cope with an ambiguous situation. As far as many children are concerned they are about to lose their parents. The child's concentration is minimum at best, and non-existent at worst. The child is engulfed in unfamiliar emotions and filled with uncertainty, but still expected to perform as if nothing has happened. How the children, parents, and teachers deal with this situation will have profound consequences on the rest of the children's lives.

The "What If" State

The child is in a constant state of "what if." What if the custodial parent will also leave? What if he/she can not take the place of the departed

parent? What if his/her custodial parent will find another partner and lose the love reserved for him/her? These are all real possibilities that the child must deal with without any training. Since the children has little opportunity to actively change or control their own, or parents circumstances, (Volgy, 1991) they are at the mercy of the circumstance.

Regression

Regression is a defense mechanism to which many children revert. The children may become babyish and cling to the parents in an attempt to reaffirm their love for them. This manipulation by the child may serve to further lower the child's self-esteem if the parent choose to chastise the child's behavior as childish and manipulative, instead of understanding that it is the child's means of dealing with his/her new reality.

Denial

Children can be extremely cruel to each other. Children of divorced parents must put up with the ridicule of their peers. Many children deny that their parents are divorced in an attempt to spare themselves of peer group denigration. Denying to others or to themselves that their parents are divorced or having a false sense of hope that the parents are likely to get back together severely hampers the healing process for the child, and keeps him/her in the unhealthy state of denial.

Escapism

Many children try to escape their parent's divorce by involving themselves in numerous activities. They keep themselves so busy that they don't have time to think about or deal with their family problems. Some children will play outdoors more with friends, while others will drown themselves into books and television. Unfortunately, a small percentage even attempt suicide, the ultimate in escapism.

Anger

Anger due to divorce is one of the most common traits in children. Children may become excessively irritable or may have temper tantrums (Weiss, 1979). Children may become aggressive and destructive, venting their frustrations on family, friends, or objects. Children can be terribly angry with the parents. The thought is "how can you do such a thing to me and the family?" The feeling is one of intense rage and indignation towards the parents. This anger may manifest itself in sleep disorders which are also common in children during divorce proceedings. Nightmares can be a frequent occurrence for a child since he/she has not effectively dealt consciously with the situation, and therefore their subconscious becomes very active during their sleeping hours trying to resolve the crisis.

Repression

A minority of the children will repress their emotions. By repressing, the child exclude threatening or painful thoughts and feelings from awareness (Corey & Corey, 1993). "By pushing their feelings into their unconscious, they are able to manage the anxiety that grows out of situations involving guilt and conflict" (Corey & Corey, 1993, p. 54) that they are otherwise unable or prepared to deal with. Parents must encourage their children to express their feelings. Having the child express her/his self by conversing with a friend, or talking into a tape recorder, or by just drawing a picture of themselves reflecting how they feel will give the parent a good indication of the child's state of mind, and possibly prevent future problems.

Euphoria

On the other hand, there can also be a feeling of euphoria, especially if the marriage has been plagued with physical, emotional, or verbal abuse. Many children feel as if they can begin their lives over again after the split-up of their parents, and pursue interest that were once prohibited or frowned upon. The divorce is seen by these children as a real relief (Arnold, 1980). In this sense, divorce can be beneficial to the child, a new, fresh beginning. But studies have shown that less than 10 percent of the children of divorce were relieved by their parents' decision to divorce despite the high incidence

of exposure to physical violence during the marriage (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). The overwhelming feeling from the child's perspective is to live with the abuse as long as the family stays together.

Children Need Both Parents

Isaacs and Levin (1984) administered the Draw-a-Family Test to school-age children (ages 5 to 11 years) during the first year of parental separation and then again the following year. They focussed their attention on the observed family composition and relative size of each parent in the drawings. They found that children in mother custody families, over time, increasingly omitted their dads from the drawings. Although initially the child saw the father as larger or the same size as the mother, by the second year of post-separation, the father was drawn smaller than the mother or altogether omitted. As they omitted their fathers they tended to include people from outside the nuclear family, most likely to fill the void the fathers left. The study also concluded that the creativity of these children were reduced (Kaslow & Schwartz, 1987). This suggest that an intimate interpersonal relationship with both parents is extremely critical for the social and creative development of the child, and without it, the child is being deprived a necessary ingredient for social and academic achievement.

Children of divorced parents often lack the intimacy taken for granted in functional families. If the single parent must work, the child becomes a latch key child, is sent off to a care giver, or the schools are utilized as care givers until the parent can retrieve the child. This type of arrangement can frustrate the child, especially if the child is forced to "hang around" and wait for parents long after his/her friends and classmates have gone home. The child feels abandoned and neglected.

The bonding with the custodial and the estranged parent is often weakened by the limited time each parent shares with the child. So the child is likely to feel shuffled from parent to parent, and believe he/she is being raised by less than committed parents.

The parents may see the divorce as a cure for a conflict-ridden marriage and expect an improvement in their lives while also expecting the child to feel the same. But the child often feels the need to reverse the divorce decision and restore the family unit. As a result, the child and the parents may be driven further apart, exacerbating the feeling of isolation the child is trying to confront and overcome (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

Helping the Child Through Divorce

One way to possibly exclude the need for professional counseling for the child is for the parents to simply plan ahead, remembering that the divorce i.

most likely the most significant event to happen in the child's young life. If divorce is imminent, the parents can lessen the trauma on the children by preparing them for the inevitable. Parents must sit down together with the children and explain in as basic terms as possible how the family structure is about to change and why the change is unavoidable. As previously mentioned, the children need not be burdened with details since they probably wouldn't understand them. But important aspects of the situation can be explained in terms the children can understand by using examples of children's own difficulties with playmates.

Parental assurance that it is in no way the child's fault for the parents breakup, and that the parents are divorcing each other and not the children may relieve some uncertainty on the child's behalf. Reassuring the children that they are loved, and respecting their feelings will go a long way in their ability to deal with the situation. If this interaction occurs far enough in advance, it will serve to strengthen the trust between the children and the parents and provide the child with an effective model for conflict resolution (Cull & Hardy, 1974). Parents must realize that the children are also going through a divorce, but normally without the support system of friends and relatives to which the adults have access. By not underestimating the trauma

the children will experience, and effectively planning for it, the children may be spared future emotional problems.

Counseling

Again, counseling for the adolescent child may or may not be necessary. The deciding factor of course will be the child's emotional state. If counseling is indicated, it is extremely important for the counselor to exhibit patience, sincerity, and empathy towards the child. Having a limited vocabulary, the child may be unable to articulate his/her various emotions. Therefore, the counselor must be cognizant of the divorce circumstances, and keenly aware of the child's history to correctly interpret the child's feelings. When the children cannot cope with the overwhelming nature of their feelings, they are bound to use defense mechanisms. They deny, repress, withdraw, regress, project, and detach (Cull & Hardy, 1974) in order to avoid dealing with the pain of a lost relationship.

The child must be shown how to mourn. The counselor should guide the child through a step-by-step process of understanding the variety of emotions that they are experiencing, and that these feelings are normal and expected. Expecting the child to see the entire reality at once may only bring resistance and sink the child further into one of many defense mechanisms (Cull & Hardy, 1974). Helping the children accept this new reality could be

accelerated with involvement of the parents in the children's counseling. Additionally, role playing is another tactic that may be used to help the children describe their feelings. Allowing the children to act out their emotions will visually demonstrate what the young children can not verbally articulate.

Summary & Conclusion

Divorce brings on a myriad of strange and unusual emotions for pre-adolescent children. Emotions they are not qualified to handle at such a young age without the support and guidance of caring adults. Divorce of a child's parents can be the most devastating event in the child's limited existence, and the residual effects may last for years. Though most children get over their parents divorce within a couple of years, the emotional health of the children must be taken much more seriously if as a society we expect our children to grow and mature properly.

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